

Respect common space

NO BONUS tonight, PM Lee declared half-way through his speech to laughter from the audience.

All he had was "a bonus lecture on a serious topic" – the issue of religious tolerance.

Looking back on the Aware saga, PM Lee said "it was hardly the way to conduct a mature public discussion of issues where views were deeply divided".

He made clear that the Government is not concerned over who controlled Aware as it is one of many NGOs in Singapore, and the Government's position on issues like homosexuality is clear.

At the same time, he said it was an attempt by a religiously-motivated group that entered civil space to take over an NGO it disapproved of, and impose its agenda.

This was bound to provoke a push back from groups who held the opposite view, said PM Lee.

The media, PM Lee said, also got caught up in the drama at times.

There is a global trend of rising religiosity, with religious groups becoming more organised and active, PM Lee pointed out.

This is true of all faiths, all over the world.

In the US, for example, there is a wave of revival and rise of mega-churches, and US politics is strongly influenced by religion.

Among Muslims, there is a stronger sense

of a global umma (Arabic for "Muslim community").

Malaysia has seen a major change in one generation, with a stricter observance of rules on dress, food, alcohol, contact between men and women, and Islam becoming a major factor in politics.

Singapore is being carried along by this global tide, said PM Lee.

"Religion is a positive force in human societies," he said.

"It provides spiritual strength, guidance, solace and a sense of purpose to many, especially in our fast-changing and uncertain world."

At the same time, stronger religious fervour can have side effects which must be managed carefully, particularly in a multi-religious society, PM Lee cautioned.

Risks

He pointed out three risks in particular.

First, aggressive proselytisation.

Although there are high-profile cases such as the recent case of a couple who surreptitiously distributed Christian tracts offensive to other faiths, less extreme cases, such as groups trying to convert very ill patients in hospitals, can cause problems too, said PM Lee.

Intolerance was the second risk, with PM

Lee mentioning children who have converted from their parents' religion declining to fulfil the funeral rites of their parents, or even staying away from the funerals.

Exclusiveness – segregating into separate exclusive circles, and not integrating with those of other faiths – was the third risk.

To counter these risks, PM Lee set out four basic rules.

First, he urged all groups to exercise tolerance and restraint.

"Rules which apply only to one group cannot be made into laws that apply to everyone," said PM Lee.

The guiding principle, he said, must be "live and let live".

The second rule is that religion must stay separate from politics.

Unlike other countries with one dominant faith, Singapore cannot allow religion to play the same role in politics.

"If one insists he is doing his God's work, and the other says he is doing his God's work, and both take these as absolute imperatives, the result will be a clash between different religious groups, which will tear us apart," said PM Lee.

The third rule set out was that the Government must remain secular.

While religious groups are free to propagate their teachings on issues, such as the integrated resorts, the Human Organ Transplant Act and Section 377A, they "should accept that other groups may have different views, informed by different beliefs, which they should respect".

The fourth rule is that there must be common space for all Singaporeans to share.

"This space must be secular and neutral, because it is the only way all groups can feel at ease and share it," said PM Lee.

These four rules, PM Lee said, must apply in Singapore, no matter what other countries do.

"The basis for this is practical reality of our society, not abstract political theory or divine revelation," he said.

– Ng Tze Yong



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